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ABSTRACT

Interest in book reports can be revitalized by having students present desired information about plot, characters, author, and criticism in new and imaginative forms. Students may give a book report by means of a newscast, which could be taped or videotaped as well; by depicting a novel through pictures, perhaps with the aid of captions; and by describing a book through a special, limited vocabulary, (e.g., sports terms). They could also publish a newspaper front page, with the plot supplying the headline and lead article, the editorial presenting a critical review of the book, and news articles discussing author and characters. Another technique is for the student to assume the role of an agent for a publishing or movie company and "sell" the book. In evaluating the results of either traditional or innovative projects, emphasis must be placed on positive teacher and peer group criticism--student enthusiasm should not be drowned in a sea of sharp words or red ink. (MF)

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OH NO, NOT ANOTHER ONE OF THOSE (UGH!) BOOK REPORTS!!

by Sheldon F. Katz

Breathes there a parent with heart so faint that
has not to his child has said,
"Go read a book!"

Breathes there a teacher with soul so sincere that
has not told the class,
"Book report due in three weeks!"

And breathes there a student with stomach so strong that has not felt ill at the above commands?

The battle today seems to get the youngster to stick a nose into the pages of a book and then console both parent and teacher by coughing up a miniature book under the guise of a book report. The value of a book report is a moot question, but let's grant that

this does give the teacher an idea as to whether or not the child DID read the book and it gives to the child a responsibility to read a book and to give some form of expression in relating what was read.

Another question is who will actually benefit from the report—the teacher or the student? The student supposedly comes out the winner because he has "read a book," but there is suspicion that the teacher is the victor because the assignment of a book report shows that the teacher is really "on the ball." That report puts the teacher's concern for reading and writing on display for all the parents to see. The parent will feel a bit of vindication for all the carping about reading that was directed at the off-spring. Somehow, the whole purpose of book reports is to help the student select interesting books, read the books, and to willingly express what ideas the author has put forth. Keep the focus on the student, and the battle of the books will diminish.

The usual book report is rather detailed or so complicated that the student feels that he must be writing his own novel in order to complete the assignment. Even though this is usually for an English class, there is little, if any, reason to have a youngster pour a ton of energy into a book report and then have it handed back slashed with red marks. The teacher, in many cases, pays more attention to the spelling and grammar, or the lack of it, and not to the expressiveness of the student. Any one can easily understand the reaction of a child who has slaved over a book and an ensuing book report only to find himself drowning in a sea of red ink. Even Moses would have difficulty cutting a swath through that red sea!

The decision that has to be made is simply if the theory behind a book report is to give back to the teacher everything that is included in a book or if it is to give vent to the imagination of a child. Why not let the child get across all of the necessary points through his own mind's eye? There is no denying that the teacher has the duty to request that the student become acquainted with certain parts of a novel. For example, some teachers require that a student learn the novel in five parts: (1) characters, (2) setting, (3) plot, (4) theme, and (5) style. There is no quarrel with this idea, although it is not essential to the enjoyment of the book. Be that as it may, let's explore some ways to have the student give to the teacher the required points of a book report.

Let the student become a newscaster. The simplest way would be to have the student give a report in the same way that any of

the newscasters report on major events, a new movie, a Broadway opening, and so on. The student would have to touch all bases demanded in the teacher's ball game, but he would have the option of doing it in his own inimitable style! Some fun may be injected into this by having the reports actually put on audio tape, and thus the student is put under studio conditions. This not only is an aid to good speech, but it also helps the student in the selection and arrangement of ideas. He will work harder to make sure that it is interesting especially when he is aware that he must "broadcast" for an audience of his classmates as well as the teacher. If the school is fortunate enough to have television equipment, then the students might become television newscasters and have the reports put on video tape. THAT would put a class in orbit!

Another method to arouse the interest of a student is to have him do the report "graphically." That is, the report is to be done with pictures only. This is an ideal way of getting the student to understand what is the "plot" of a book. The student would have to select or draw pictures that would depict (1) the background, (2) the incentive moment, (3) several crises, (4) the climax, and (5) the resolution. Other parts of the book may be done in the same fashion. Should the teacher feel that it is necessary to give a small aid to the students, then he might allow them to have captions for the pictures. Those captions should be akin to captions in a newspaper—short, dynamic, and to the point. Don't let the child run away with words when the main idea is to have a graphic book report. This type of report also discourages the youngster whose only acquaintance with a book is the jacket of that book, or the youngster who likes to work with the book reports of an older brother or sister that were done in previous years. That youngster soon finds out that he will have to read a book on his own if he wants to get the report done!

Now do you really want to have some fun? Well, then have the student tell the book report to some one who does not understand or speak English. That'll grab them. This has some relationship to a unit on 'How To Give Directions,' and the student will be forced to give out with lots of imagination. You may want to relent a bit and let the student have some help, such as, saying that the person listening to the report understands certain bits of English; perhaps he understands only teen-age slang, sports terms, one syllable words, and the like. It might be that the student will do this report

with the aid of pictures or drawings as well as other bits plucked from his brain. One can easily imagine the care with which the youngster will pick the words to be used and the ideas to get across.

How about the front page of a newspaper? Let the banner (the headline that goes across the entire page) be the main idea of the plot, and then have the student recap the plot in the form of a lead paragraph (or paragraphs when needed). The opinion of the book could be in the form of an editorial, while points about the author, and all could be in the form of other news stories.

Give the student an occupation. For example, the student is assigned to be a salesman (or saleslady) for a publishing company and he will have to sell the book to you. This is, of course, an honest sales person and therefore will give an honest opinion of the book. In the main, the student will go over the regular parts of a book report, but to top it off, the student will put a price on the book, say 10¢ to $10.00. If the student really likes the book he may want to retail it for $7.50 to $10.00; if he thinks it is about average, he would price it in the $4.00 to $7.50 range, and if he believes it to be an inferior book the range of price would go from 10¢ to under $4.00. The final price would be in line with the student's opinion of the book.

A different occupation is that of an agent for a movie company. Pretend that the movie company has just bought the rights to this particular book, and the student is the agent who must convince the producer (and guess who is the producer!) to put up the money and do the film. Even if the student is not overly fond of the book, his imagination will be taxed to find reasons to convince the producer to go ahead with work on the film. The teacher might even discover an agent who is so honest that he will try to convince the producer NOT to put up any money for the project.

Once during the year, the student might be allowed to have a "free form" type of book report. He would be able to use any method that he thought best to get through to the teacher and to the class. It might well be that the less imaginative child will bank on some form previously assigned while others will come up with something truly way-out. The teacher will have to be on the alert for any "snow jobs" that descend upon him. It should be understood that this type of report must be fairly short and straight to the point! However, again let's emphasize that the burden of imagination is to be thrust upon the student.

A majority of the book reports deal with (1) a short biography of the author, where available, (2) listing and description of characters, (3) the time and place of the novel (setting), (4) summary of the plot, and (5) the opinion of the book. With some possible exceptions, these items can be included in the forms mentioned. The main thought to keep in mind is that the student is struggling to get across some ideas in his own fashion. Let him not be discouraged by sharp criticism nor by voluminous comments in red ink (while we think of it, now—throw away that red pencil, red crayon, or red pen—that's right . . . . NOW!). Where a report is given in front of a class, and the teacher wants comments from other students, let members of the class start off with a positive comment. Train them to look for something good in work done by others. Too often, a child wants to polish an apple or make his own work look better by demeaning the job done by a fellow student.

The ideas listed in this article are merely a few of the many ways to enliven that old bug-a-boo of an assignment called "a book report." Surely, any teacher can come up with similar ideas or have these give seed to other ways of accomplishing that assignment. Let the imagination of a teacher give birth to new and interesting ways to do a book report, and the student will respond with a surprising amount of brain power and sheer energy. One word of caution, though, if the teacher is not careful, then both the teacher and the whole class might just find out that reading books and giving book reports can be fun after all!